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## Remote-control trains' safety is questioned

By Mark Agee  
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**ARLINGTON** - John Hart watched in bewilderment as a Union Pacific locomotive repeatedly rammed railcars until they toppled over in front of an oncoming freight train near the Stadium Drive crossing last week.

It looked as if the locomotive was being piloted by a crazed or angry engineer, Hart said.

"He kept backing up and hitting it again," said Hart, who works for American Shell Center near the tracks on Division Street. "Everybody there was under the impression that he was hitting it on purpose."

The engine was in fact being controlled remotely and the operator was merely out of position to see the cars he was hitting, Union Pacific officials later said.

No one was hurt, but the March 10 train accident has brought to Arlington a national debate between unions and railroads about the safety of remote-control switch-engines and how they should be regulated.

The Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen says remote-control locomotives are dangerous because they take one of the human operators out of the equation.

"That's one less set of eyes and judgment you have," said Terry Briggs, chairman of the union's Texas Legislative Board.

Union Pacific says the locomotives are safer -- for the same reason.

"You eliminate the chance of miscommunication," Omaha-based spokesman John Bromley said.

Throwing the debate into starker relief, the east Arlington switch-yard that is now using remote-control locomotives is the same one where an accident in December 2002 caused a derailment that left a railcar dangling over Texas 360.

That derailment shut down the freeway for hours and falling debris caused several traffic accidents. But police said the railcar easily could have fell and caused a deadly pileup.

The 2002 accident was caused by a conventional switch-engine operation, but Briggs said the remote-control engines have only added more danger to switch-yards.

Conventional switch-engine operations use an engineer and at least one switchman on the ground to watch in front of the railcars as the switch-engine is pushing.

With a remote-control switch-engine, the switchman on the ground controls the train with a small transmitter attached to his vest. The worker is completely responsible for the operation.

The union is lobbying for federal regulations that would require operators to see in front of the cars they are pushing, among other rules. Currently, the Federal Railroad Administration offers only recommendations for the use of remote control locomotives -- not requirements.

The union would like the railroad administration to turn those recommendations into rules, because railroads are not enforcing them, Briggs said.

For example, the railroad administration suggests that operators not ride on railcars while they are controlling the engine that is pushing them.

"The railroads have ignored that," Briggs said. "We have guys who are hanging on the side of a box car, with their lantern, with their radio and operating the engine all at the same time."

About 30 U.S. cities, such as Shreveport, La., have banned the use of remote-control switch engines until more safety considerations are put into place.

Bromley said that Union Pacific remote-control locomotive operations currently account for 21 percent of yard-crew hours.

As the use of the engines is spreading, the railroad is keeping close track of safety statistics, Bromley said.

"We have not had a single accident where it was the fault of the technology," Bromley said.

"They were all human error, as was the accident in Arlington. They would have still happened with a human engineer."

The injury rate for Union Pacific remote-control locomotives was 5.2 percent lower than conventional operations in 2003, measured in injuries per 10,000 job starts, Bromley said.

Remote-control locomotives had a slightly higher total accident rate with .1 percent more wrecks, Bromley said.

Federal Railroad Administration spokesman Steven Kulm does not yet have number available, but said Canadian railroads have used the locomotives for more than a decade and found them to be safer.

The Canadian National railroad, which pioneered the technology in the 1990s, claimed a 50 percent drop in rail yard accidents, according to a report sent to U.S. railroad officials in 2000.

"In general, remote control locomotive were deemed that they had a safe enough record in Canada that we allowed their use in switch-yards," Kulm said.

U.S. Senators John McCain, R-Ariz., and Ernest Hollings, D-S.C., leaders of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, asked the Federal Railroad Administration to study the safety of remote-control locomotives.

They wrote in a September letter that "little data exists to judge the safety experience of this technology in the United States."

The railroad administration will release a preliminary report sometime this spring, Kulm said.

Briggs said that the research should have been done sooner, before the remote technology was so widely implemented.

"The railroads needed to slow down," Briggs said. "Now the employees and the public are the ones being experimented on."

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